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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [RU](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI TELLS DAS HALE RUSSIAN MIGS ARE
GOOD FOR MARCH 14

REF: A. BEIRUT 1729

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1761

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a December 17 dinner with visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale and the Ambassador, Parliamentary Majority Leader Saad Hariri said the Russian deal to provide ten MiG-29 aircraft to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), provided with no strings attached, threatened Hizballah and would be good for March 14. He argued the planes would be a great tool for fighting terrorism in the Palestinian refugee camps, as well as for border security, and that their provision was compatible with continued U.S. assistance to the LAF. He claimed that with the deal, the Russians were sending a message to Iran and Syria that "Lebanon exists." Hariri repeated his comments from his December 13 meeting with Codel Ackerman (Ref B), in some cases verbatim, saying the new U.S. Administration should engage its friends (Arab allies) before it engages its foes (Iran and Syria). He also echoed his own words to Ackerman in stressing how crucial a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to peace and stability across the region. He felt confident about March 14's chances in the 2009 parliamentary elections, saying the alliance would run candidates in all districts.

[1](#)2. (C) DAS Hale noted the U.S. commitment to building a long-term relationship between the U.S. military and the LAF, and pointed out that the Russian deal, and Defense Minister Elias Murr's disparaging comments about American assistance following it, could be viewed as an assault on that burgeoning relationship, and make it difficult for U.S. policymakers to justify it before Congress. In a December 18 follow-up meeting, Hariri ally MP Ghattas Khoury provided that the deal would not be allowed to undermine the U.S.-Lebanon military relationship. End summary.

RUSSIAN MIGS

[1](#)3. (C) On December 17, DAS Hale and the Ambassador, accompanied by NEA/ELA Lebanon Desk Officer Matt Irwin and

PolEconOff, called on MP Saad Hariri at his residence in Qoreitem. Hariri advisors MP Ghattas Khoury and Nader Hariri, as well as press advisor Hani Hammoud, also attended the meeting and dinner. Hariri began with the newly announced deal for Russian provision of ten MiG-29 aircraft to Lebanon, saying he hoped the deal would be viewed positively. He noted he had spoken with Vice President Cheney during the day and raved about the capabilities the aircraft could provide Lebanon. He said the planes would come as a grant, with no political strings attached -- specifically none related to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

¶4. (C) Ghattas Khoury explained that the deal includes ten MiG-29s for \$300 million and \$60-70 million for weapons, including air-to-air missiles, unguided bombs, guided air-to-ground missiles, and 30mm cannons. Khoury was unaware of any discussions of maintenance and sustainment costs. He said there is a possibility for Lebanon to receive artillery, and that tanks were discussed in Moscow, though he doubted they would materialize. He added that no surface-to-air systems were on the table.

¶4. (C) Hariri commented that the Russian deal would be good for March 14. He claimed that Hizballah was threatened by the deal and Hizballah television al-Manar had already made negative comments about it. He said the concept of a strong LAF makes Hizballah nervous, and also suggested LAF MiGs could complicate Israeli overflights in southern Lebanon, potentially depriving Hizballah of another justification for its arms. (Note: The Embassy found no particularly negative reaction from Hizballah in the press, including al-Manar. In

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an official statement on December 19, a Hizballah representative said his party "supports arming the LAF with all possible equipment from anywhere to confront Israel." End note.)

¶5. (C) Hariri enthused about how the MiGs could be used to fight terrorists in the Palestinian camps. He claimed that if the LAF had had such weapons during its battle with extremists in the Nahr al-Barid camp in 2007, it would have suffered far fewer casualties. He also believed the planes would be useful in enforcing the security of Lebanon's borders. "The MiGs will make Hizballah and Syria think twice about another May 7," he said, referring to Hizballah's use of arms against fellow Lebanese in May 2008.

¶6. (C) Hariri said the deal was a Russian message to Iran and Syria that "Lebanon exists" as a sovereign state. He believed it was an opportunity for Russia and the U.S. to come together and corner Syria. He pointed to U.S.-French cooperation following the assassination of his father in 2005 as a precedent. Irwin noted that many of the weapons Hizballah acquires from Iran and Syria are of Russian origin, as the Israelis found during the 2006 war.

¶7. (C) DAS Hale explained that one of the goals of the U.S. Foreign Military Financing program in Lebanon was to build a lasting relationship, with training and assistance to ensure effective usage of U.S. military equipment. He pointed out that the Russian deal raised many questions, not only about the LAF capability to use, maintain, and finance the long-term costs of the Russian equipment, but also about Lebanon's intentions, particularly toward Israel. He said the U.S. Administration would face many challenges to its policy of assisting the LAF after this agreement. He also noted that Defense Minister Elias Murr had made negative comments in Moscow about American assistance, which reflected badly on the nature of the relationship. Hariri assured Hale that Murr would clarify his Moscow statements and reaffirm his commitment to working with the U.S.

¶8. (C) In a December 18 follow-up meeting with Ghattas Khoury, DAS Hale explained in more explicit terms U.S. concerns with the Russian MiG deal, and received assurances

that Khoury would work with Hariri toward three measures to ease American concerns. First, the LAF would undertake an assessment of the deal, to determine the utility of the MiGs as well as the LAF's capacity to use and maintain them. Second, if after that assessment the GOL decided to take the planes, the GOL would divert no money identified to support U.S. cooperation with the LAF to the MiGs. Finally, Khoury said Hariri would ensure that Defense Minister Murr took action to repair the damage done by his comments about U.S. assistance in Moscow.

ADVICE FOR NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATION

¶9. (C) Hariri said he hoped the new U.S. Administration "will not make the same mistakes the last one made," and will take advantage of the good will it enjoys to make a difference. He felt it crucial that the new team in Washington seek a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the beginning of its term. He also reiterated comments made with Codel Ackerman December 13 (Ref B), stressing the importance of U.S. engagement with its Arab allies as a prerequisite to engagement with Syria or Iran. "You need your allies in order to counter Iran," he said. "If you use the same tactics as the French have with Syria, it leaves a bad taste in the mouths of the Egyptians, Saudis, Emiratis, and Jordanians. You don't want to leave them demoralized."

CONFIDENT FOR THE ELECTIONS
WORKING WITH INDEPENDENTS

¶10. (C) DAS Hale asked Hariri about March 14's preparations for the parliamentary elections. Hariri said he felt confident that public opinion is with March 14. He said the

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alliance would run candidates in all electoral districts, but admitted that in some districts, March 14 parties might not be able to win seats. In those places, he said, March 14 was looking for good independent candidates to run in their place. He stressed that even in districts where they could not win, it was important for March 14 candidates to run, in order to build recognition in anticipation of the 2010 municipal elections. Still, his focus was on the 2009 elections: "If we lose, I will pack my bags and leave. I will not see Syria and Iran take Lebanon hostage," he said.

¶11. (C) Hariri said independent Michel Murr was on board with March 14, but Hariri was worried about Murr's insistence on bringing the Armenian Tashnaq party along with him (Ref A). Nonetheless, Hariri said it would be easier to negotiate with Tashnaq with Murr in the March 14 fold. "We can ask them what the hell they are doing with Iran and Syria," he said. On Tripoli alliances, Hariri stated he was particularly open to an alliance with former PM Najib Mikati, and that he had spoken with him two days before. Hariri had heard Mikati was still talking to Syria about possible alliances, and that he believed it was too early to cast his lot with either side.

¶12. (C) Comment: It was apparent in subsequent meetings with President Suleiman and LAF Commander Kahwaji that there had been no prior consultation with either the LAF or other government officials on accepting the Russian offer of MiG aircraft. Hariri, Khoury, and other March 14 leaders seemed to view the deal largely through the prism of internal politics, seeing in it a way to give a major morale boost to the Lebanese and put March 8 on the defensive. Lebanon's experience with a French Mirage deal in the 1980s was cited positively by Hariri and others, as the Mirages were used briefly against militants in Palestinian refugee camps, and gave the Lebanese a temporary sense of international support for their security needs. In fact, the Mirage deal was a considerable scandal even by Lebanese standards. International outrage quickly put an end to their use in camps. The jets were acquired in a secretive way that

sparked charges of corruption and decades of litigation. For political, financial and logistical reasons the aircraft were never used again, deteriorated, and eventually were traded away at discount prices. Should the MiG deal ever be consummated (and the President, LAF Commander, and more thoughtful March 14 leaders privately doubted it would) the MiGs would be another Mirage-like burden on the LAF.

¶13. (C) The MiG offer has undoubted political benefits for March 14, which would be undercut were the U.S. to express public reservations about the proposal. We have registered opposition clearly in private, and will continue to work behind-the-scenes to ensure that the LAF,s assessment concludes (probably after the Spring elections) that the the LAF neither needs the MiGs, nor can afford the maintenance costs, giving the GOL a graceful way to decline the Russian offer. End comment.

¶14. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

SISON